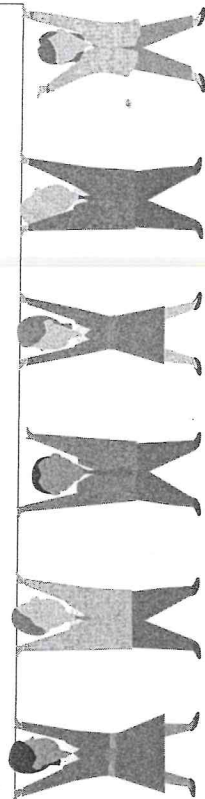


Chapter One

What Is Pyramid Response to Intervention?



The only source of knowledge is experience.

—**Albert Einstein**

This book is written for practitioners by practitioners. As authors, we represent three different generations of public school educators—a Baby Boomer, a Gen-Xer, and a Millennial—with over 75 years of combined experience in working with children and their parents. Each of us has implemented professional learning communities in our schools and districts. Each of us believes deeply in the power of collaboration and the goal of continuous improvement, and we’ve struggled to find increasingly better answers to the question, “How do we respond when students don’t learn?” Woven throughout this book are stories of real schools that have also been seeking better answers. Narrative case studies that open each chapter show how various responses play out at the school, classroom, and individual student levels. We believe that educators should always consider our actions’ impact upon individual students, not just upon the average scores that comprise a school’s collective adequate yearly

progress. As practitioners in our own schools and districts, the three of us have witnessed firsthand the power of timely, systematic interventions on student learning. This book explores two closely related ideas, response to intervention (RTI) and the pyramid of interventions (POI), that we believe benefit educators at every level in finding new ways to help every child be successful.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Einstein once defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” In this spirit, for 30 years, American schools used a *discrepancy model* to determine whether a struggling child would receive additional time and support through special education. The discrepancy model measures the difference between a child’s potential and actual achievement to determine whether the child has a learning disability. The problem with this system, of course, is that no action can take place until there is a discrepancy—until the child has already failed. Under this system, as John McCook (2006, p. 1) comments, “It must be the child’s fault, or the problem certainly must be the child. Why else would the child have such a discrepancy between expected achievement and actual achievement?”

Response to intervention (RTI) is a new movement that shifts the responsibility for helping all students become successful from the special education teachers and curriculum to the entire staff, including special and regular education teachers and curriculum. This seismic shift in educational policy culminated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), which was signed into law by President George W. Bush in December 2004.

Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005) observe, “What makes RTI different from . . . prior means of helping students is that . . . assessment and instruction practices are integrated into an objectives-based system with built-in decision stages” (p. x). An RTI system promises more than an alternative way for qualifying students to receive special services; it promises (and may in fact require) a unified system of education (Faust, 2006). In this unified system, assessment—universal, ongoing, and formative—assumes an increasingly important role in classrooms and schools. A team of experts will use a systemic approach to implement programs with *fidelity*—the way they were intended and designed.

Human resources (including classroom teachers, speech and language pathologists, psychologists and social workers, special education teachers, and administrators) will be deployed in new ways to collectively assist all students. New academic resources will be sought out, evaluated, and implemented with individuals and groups of students more often and with greater diagnostic specificity than they have in the past. Schools will provide flexible support to students by modifying the frequency and types of assistance.

While components of RTI had been around for years (and were widely developed at Adlai Stevenson High School, as we shall see in the next section), schools traditionally limited its use to special education classrooms. Today this approach centers on the regular classroom teacher:

Notwithstanding section 607(b), when determining whether a child has a specific learning disability as defined in section 602(29), a local education agency shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability. . . . In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to a scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures. {IDEIA, 2004, Section 614(b)(6)(A & B)}

Simply put, under RTI, schools will consider most students for special education services only after the students have not responded to a series of timely, systematic, increasingly focused, and intensive research-based interventions, which are the responsibility of the regular education program. This is a seismic and explicit change from the discrepancy model. Federal regulations argue:

There are many reasons why the use of the IQ-discrepancy criterion should be abandoned. The IQ discrepancy criterion is potentially harmful to students as it results in delaying intervention until the student’s achievement is sufficiently low so that the discrepancy is achieved. (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, p. 35802)

The phrase *potentially harmful* seems to imply that schools that continue to wait for students to fail in order to qualify them to receive

additional services might find themselves in jeopardy of legal action by the families of students with special needs.

There are viable alternatives to the discrepancy model. While some researchers and educators were developing the theories and practices that led to the creation of RTI as envisioned in IDEIA, others were simultaneously considering the question, “How does our school respond when we discover that some children are not learning?” These educators, following the professional learning communities model of Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour, created a tiered system of interventions graphically represented by a pyramid: the pyramid of interventions.

Pyramid of Interventions (POI)

Adlai Stevenson High School in suburban Chicago was practicing something very like RTI long before it was written into law. Stevenson is one of three schools in the nation to have received the U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon award on four separate occasions. It is a model of continuous improvement that veteran educational consultant and author Mike Schmoker (2001) has recognized as “an undeniably world-class school” (p. 31).

Yet in 1983, the staff at Stevenson realized that although many of its students were successful because of the faculty’s hard work, more than 25% “had been relegated to remedial curricular tracks and, at the end of each semester, teachers were recommending that hundreds of students be transferred to a lower track” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004, p. 44). In discussing this challenge, Stevenson teachers focused on the reality that the incoming students lacked the necessary study skills and work habits, and that simply allowing them to fail did not seem to motivate students to change their behaviors. The faculty came to realize that they were doing an outstanding job of giving students the *opportunity* to learn: “But, to the enduring credit of Stevenson’s wonderful faculty, they did not settle for giving students the chance to learn. Instead, they began a systematic effort to better meet the needs of all students so that the school’s promise of ‘success for all’ might be a reality rather than a slogan” (DuFour et al., 2004, p. 47).

This effort led to what has become known as the *pyramid of interventions* (POI), a collective and systematic approach to providing additional time and support to students who experience difficulties in learning.

A Vision of the Future

When schools operate as professional learning communities, create a pyramid of interventions, and implement response to intervention, they create the opportunity for powerful change. We believe these three ideas will unite the long-separated worlds of regular education and special education to create a unified system of schooling. With the demise of the “wait-to-fail” model, we can now move toward a systematic, directive, and timely response to all children when they don’t learn adequately, regardless of labels or subgroups.

Pyramid Response to Intervention (PRTI)

Although we are hesitant to invent another educational acronym, we need a term to help educators understand that the POI developed at Stevenson High School and the RTI approach prescribed in IDEIA 2004 are almost the same system. Each brings its own unique strengths, and together they create a synergy that we believe will be superior to either system used alone.

Both POI and RTI demand that we address the culture of our schools rather than simply adding new structures—that we make a cultural shift to ensure that all staff members demonstrate a collective responsibility to help all students learn. Both are based on the premise that some students need more time and support to ensure their learning. Both encourage educators not to wait until students possess the correct label to provide this support, lest students fall so far behind that they can never catch up. Both provide a systematic process of intervention that is implemented schoolwide, rather than varying teacher to teacher. Both provide academic and behavioral interventions—academic interventions for those who *can’t* learn, behavioral interventions for those who *won’t* learn. (Behavioral interventions are described in detail in chapter 9.) Finally, both ideas utilize a system of interventions that are increasingly more intensive and directive, and both are commonly represented visually by pyramids with three tiers (see Figure 1-1, page 6).

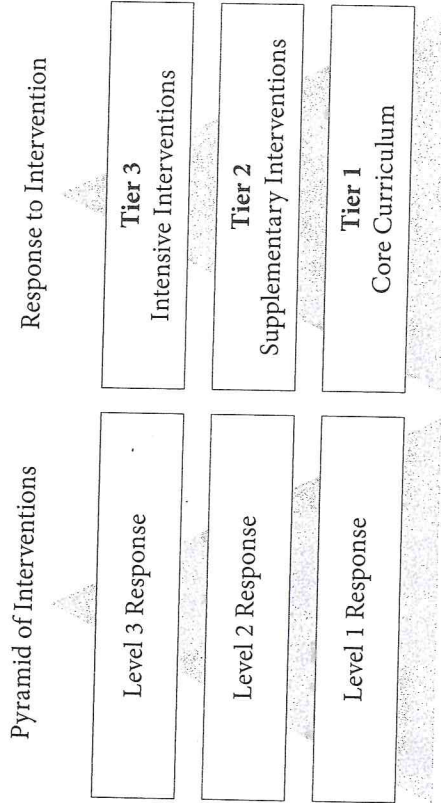


Figure 1-1: A comparison of the pyramid of interventions and response to intervention models

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will go into more depth on the individual characteristics of RTI and POI. In this chapter, we’ll explore how PRTI pulls the best from both. From response to intervention, PRTI takes its structure, its approach to universal screening and progress monitoring, and its requirement for research-based interventions. From the pyramid of interventions, PRTI takes its culture; its philosophy of timely, directive, systemic, flexible support; and its process for creating and supporting shared instructional goals.

Structure

The base of the PLC pyramid of interventions describes the initial interventions we implement when some students don’t learn what we have defined as “essential.” By contrast, the base of the RTI pyramid describes the core program that 100% of the students receive. While the first two critical questions of the professional learning community (“What exactly do we expect all students to learn?” and “How will we know if they’ve learned it?” [DuFour et al., 2006]) help to define and ensure a guaranteed, viable core curriculum, the PLC pyramid has not typically depicted Tier 1 as the core program.

Universal Screening

RTI encourages us to use universal screening tools in both academics and behavior even before the school year has begun to identify students

who need additional time and support. Some professional learning communities already employ some universal screening measures, such as the Counselor Watch program at Adlai Stevenson High School. However, under RTI, schools are encouraged 1) to apply universal screening in a broader context that includes behavior as well as literacy and numeracy skills, and 2) to explicitly base decisions upon highly specific data.

Frequent Progress Monitoring

Though both POI and RTI emphasize progress monitoring to measure the effectiveness of an intervention overall and for individual students, they differ in the intensity required. Schools implementing POI gather timely, frequent information on student achievement through common formative assessments, but RTI’s increased emphasis on progress monitoring might mean monitoring student progress as often as twice each week, using very short, specific probes to detect small changes in student learning. This kind of intense monitoring of students is probably more frequent than most professional learning communities use as part of a pyramid of interventions.

Research-Based Interventions

While the PLC pyramid certainly has no bias against interventions that have a research base, RTI legislation (IDEIA, 2004) places a greater emphasis on the use of scientific, research-based interventions, defined by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) as “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs” {20 USC 6312(c)(1)(F); 20 USC 6612(b)(1)}.

School Culture

PRTI also draws on the unique strengths of the professional learning communities model. PRTI schools often must modify their master schedules or “the way we do things around here” so as to provide systematic interventions during the regular school day, without forcing students to miss core instruction in the regular classroom. In addition, PRTI encourages teachers and administrators alike to “think outside of the box,” so as to provide these guaranteed interventions without hiring new staff or spending more money as a prerequisite to action. Once a professional learning

community has found a way to provide students this additional time and support, the staff “brainstorms” a series of interventions. Though schools with significant subgroups often focus on the needs of those students to the exclusion of other students who do not belong to any identifiable subgroup, a professional learning community guarantees that no student is left behind.

Timely, Directive, Systemic, Flexible Support

As in the pyramid of interventions, in PRTI, students receive *timely* interventions at the first indication that they need more time and support. This process should be *directive* rather than invitational, so that students get the extra help they need, consistently and without interruption *until they are successful*. Finally, this extra support should not be dependent upon which teacher the student has, but instead should be implemented systemically, so that every student who faces the same problem is guaranteed the same response.

Interventions are sequenced to build upon each other, from least to most restrictive, from least to most intensive, and from what happens in every classroom for all children to what happens for individual students who need highly focused, targeted help (see Figure 1-2, page 9). The system of interventions is flexible and emphasizes returning students to the regular instructional program as quickly as possible; students receive interventions only when needed and for the particular subject in which they need assistance.

Shared Instructional Goals

As noted earlier, RTI requires very frequent progress monitoring. This practice, though more intense in RTI, is not entirely new to a professional learning community. A PLC relies upon frequent, timely, common formative assessment data to determine which students need additional time and support, not last year’s summative assessment data. The RTI emphasis on progress monitoring will not be effective, however, if educators have not first collaborated to identify common instructional goals. Educators begin the PRTI process by working together in teams to answer the first two questions of a professional learning community: “What do we want students to know and be able to do *this year*?” and “How will we know if and when they’ve learned it?” The team then modifies or replaces

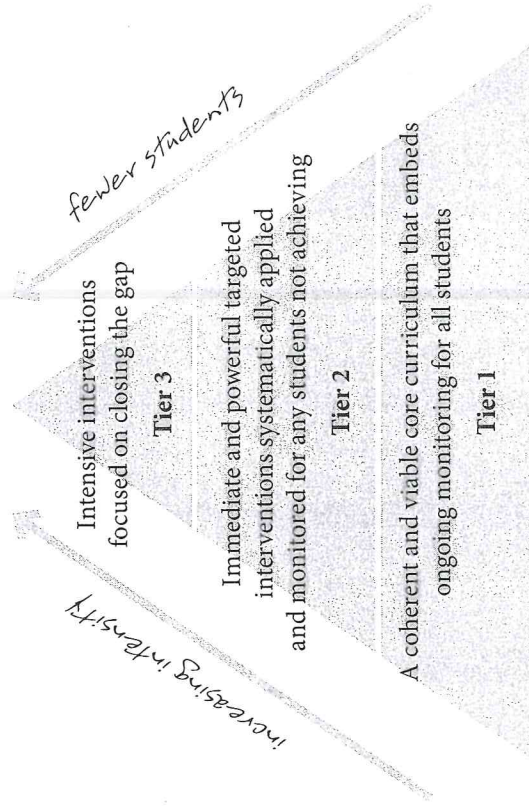


Figure 1-2: The pyramid response to intervention model

interventions when assessments indicate that they are not successful or when the team discovers a more powerful intervention.

Thus, pyramid response to intervention combines the regulatory requirements of response to intervention with the time-proven effectiveness of the pyramid of interventions. PRTI uses the well-established power of the professional learning community model to drive the structural and procedural practices of response to intervention.

The Right Work at the Right Time

We believe that American public education is on the precipice of dramatic positive change. PRTI does not merely address learning outcomes for special education students; it integrates “special education” and “regular education” into simply “education.” PRTI brings together all staff to improve learning by delivering effective instruction and interventions to all students, without first waiting for them to fail. Adopting PRTI is about using best professional practice and insisting that we do what is best, necessary, and right for all students—the right work at the right time.

We wish to reassure schools that already have begun their PLC journey that implementing PRTI will *not* be just another “new thing.” With a

few caveats (such as the need for scientific, research-based interventions; universal screening; and progress monitoring), PRTI involves the same work as answering the PLC question, “How will we respond when kids don’t learn?” For those practitioners who have not yet begun the PLC journey, we will make the case that the most promising and research-supported way to implement response to intervention is to operate as a professional learning community.

Learning by Doing

Since this is a book written for practitioners by practitioners, we want to do more than simply inform the reader about PRTI. This book is structured to lead you through a process not only to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between POI and RTI, but also to create an actual pyramid response to intervention for your school. The end of each chapter poses essential questions that are linked to activities found in the appendix. Visit go.solution-tree.com/rti to download the activities and other helpful information. You and your team can use these to answer the following essential questions:

1. How do your school’s current practices align with the essential elements of RTI?
2. How will your school respond to key RTI questions?
3. What elements of RTI are present in the pioneering models?
4. Have you created a foundation for your PRTI by implementing the essential characteristics of a professional learning community?
5. Who are your under-represented students?
6. What are all of your human and fiscal resources?
7. Are your current interventions aligned with the essential characteristics of Learning CPR?
8. What is your Tier 1 core program?
9. What are your Tier 2 supplemental interventions?
10. What are your Tier 3 intensive interventions?
11. What are your behavioral interventions?

12. How will you coordinate, document, and communicate about your PRTI?
13. Now that you have created a schoolwide, systematic PRTI, how will you begin implementation?

To begin the process, the next chapter discusses the main elements of response to intervention.